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Parental Autonomy Support and Ethnic Culture Identification Among Second-Generation Immigrants

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Born and raised in the United States, children of immigrants often face conflict over whether to endorse the norms and traditions of the family's country of origin (the natal culture) or those of mainstream U.S. society (the host culture). The authors hypothesized that when immigrant parents allow children to make their own choices concerning their cultural identity, their children will be more likely to internalize the natal culture and will experience greater well-being. Ninety-nine college-aged 2nd-generation immigrants rated their well-being, perceptions of their mother's and father's autonomy support, and their endorsement of both natal and U.S. cultures. Results demonstrated that paternal, but not maternal, autonomy support predicted greater well-being and greater endorsement of the natal culture and that immersion in the natal culture predicted some indices of well-being. Several explanations for the possibly greater significance of paternal versus maternal autonomy support in the context of immigrant families are considered.

Keywords: ethnic minority families, acculturation, adolescence, parental autonomy support, cultural identity

> According to my parents I was not American, nor would I ever be no matter how hard I tried. I felt doomed by their pronouncement, misunderstood and gradually defiant. In spite of the first lessons of arithmetic, one plus one did not equal two but zero, my conflicting selves always canceling each other out (Lahiri, 2006, p. 43).

During adolescence and young adulthood, parent–child relationships change as both parent and child seek to redefine their roles in each others' lives (Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002). While these transitions can be difficult for any family, families in which both parents are first-generation immigrants typically experience elevated stress as their second-generation children develop (Farver et al., 2002; Lay & Safdar, 2003). In these families, second-generation children wish to adopt aspects of the emigrant (host) culture into their identity but report feeling stymied by their first-generation parents, who fear losing them to the new culture (Farver, Narang, & Bhada, 2002; Killian & Hegtvedt, 2003; Lay & Safdar, 2003).

The present study seeks to understand the influence of different parenting styles on the acculturation of second-generation college students. In particular, we utilize self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000) to investigate whether individuals whose parents engage in autonomy-supportive parenting will report higher and more internalized identification with their native culture than children whose parents are controlling and not autonomy supportive.

Acculturation and the Family

Acculturation refers to changes in beliefs, values, and behavior that occur when members of a cultural minority have repeated contact with a new environment (Farver, Narang, & Bhada, 2002; Sam & Oppedal, 2002). Depending on the immigration status of individuals within the family, each member is differentially affected by acculturation stressors (Abouguendia & Noels, 2001).

Previous research has primarily focused on the experiences of first-generation immigrants (Abouguendia & Noels, 2001) who have emigrated from one country (termed the *natal country*) to another (termed the *host country*). These individuals are usually unfamiliar with basic tenants of the new culture and are therefore required to learn the fundamentals of the new society, including language, education, and employment systems (Abouguendia & Noels, 2001). Surprisingly, first-generation immigrants report less depression, less anxiety, and greater positive well-being than their native-born peers, a finding that may be explained by the tendency for first-generation immigrants to maintain and assert their ties to the natal culture when faced with perceived discrimination from the host culture (Farver, Bakhtawar, & Narang, 2002; Harker, 2001).

Members of both the host and natal culture from birth, children of immigrants (the second generation) must simultaneously explore two (or more) potentially conflicting cul-

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tures to become comfortable in their identities (Farver, Bakhtawar, & Narang, 2002; Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002; Zhou, 1998). As a result, second-generation immigrants report more daily hassles, in-group conflict, and lowered self-esteem; they also receive more frequent diagnoses of internalizing disorders than either first-generation immigrants or U.S.-born peers of the same age and socioeconomic status (Atzaba-Poria, & Pike, 2005; Lay & Safdar, 2003). One reason for these differences in well-being may be that, unlike first-generation immigrants, second-generation individuals do not have sustained, direct experiences with their natal culture from which to draw meaning in times of stress (Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002).

One way in which second-generation immigrants cope with feelings of alienation is by attempting to assimilate and gain acceptance from the host culture (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Farver, Narang, & Bhada, 2002). In one study, second-generation immigrants in America exaggerated the amount of time they invest in American activities and reported feeling highly "American" when reminded of their differences from native-born peers (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). The second-generation child's desire to assimilate is frequently met with resistance, as freedoms they desire often clash with their parents' natal cultural values (Castillo, Conoley, & Brossart, 2004; Farver, Narang, & Bhada, 2002b; Killian & Hegtvedt, 2003). Basic rites of passage in the host culture, such as dating, expression of sexual attraction, and engaging in social interactions outside of school can become battlegrounds in immigrant families, with parents restricting these behaviors in their children (Castillo et al., 2004; Dwairy, Achoui, Abouserie, & Farah, 2006; Farver, Narang, & Bhada, 2002b; Killian & Hegtvedt, 2003). These discrepant goals and motives have a deleterious effect on parent–child relationships within immigrant families (Farver, Narang, & Bhada, 2002).

Research has suggested that rejection of either the natal or the host culture may lead to lowered well-being (Harker, 2001; Sam & Berry, 1995). In contrast, optimal well-being seems to come from adopting a bicultural identity wherein both natal and host cultures are represented (Farver, Bakhtawar, & Narang, 2002; Harker, 2001; Lay & Safdar, 2003; Sam & Berry, 1995). Children who are intrinsically interested in maintaining this balance have been shown to do well over time (Farver, Bakhtawar, & Narang, 2002; Harker, 2001; Lay & Safdar, 2003; Sam & Berry, 1995). The research question thus becomes, which parenting styles are most likely to facilitate endorsement of the natal culture among second-generation children, given that these children already favor the host culture? Self-determination theory may be useful in addressing this question.

Self-Determination Theory

We posit that autonomy-supportive (rather than controlling) parenting, as defined by Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, may produce children who report stronger identification with their natal culture. Perhaps paradoxically, children may be more likely to embrace their natal culture when their parents give them the freedom to make their own choices. We elaborate below.

Self-determination theory states that all human beings need to feel self-directed in their lives, and that feelings of autonomy are fostered by supportive psychological environments (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Parenting is defined as autonomy supportive when parents try to give the child as much choice as possible in decision making or offer a meaningful rationale when choice is not possible, thereby promoting both discipline and empowerment (Grolnick, 2003). In contrast, controlling parents make parenting decisions without taking the child's perspective into account, make little attempt to engage the child in discussions, and may resort to force when demands are not met (Grolnick, 2003).

Parental autonomy support has been linked to a variety of positive outcomes among children of all ages, including increased motivation to succeed academically, increased self-regulation and responsibility taking, lower incidence of behavioral problems, and higher overall levels of well-being (Atzaba-Poria & Pike, 2005; Grolnick, 2003; Joussemet, Koestner, Lekes, & Landry, 2005; Sorkhabi, 2005). Controlling parenting has been linked to lower academic achievement, internal motivation, compliance, and overall well-being, as well as to greater behavioral problems (Atzaba-Poria & Pike, 2005; Grolnick, 2003; Sorkhabi, 2005).

These findings can be used to theorize about how first-generation immigrant parents influence the development of their second-generation immigrant child's ethnic identity. If parents allow children to explore aspects of the host and natal cultures without strong restrictions, their children may feel free to approach and internalize their native culture on their own terms. In contrast, parents who curtail their child's freedom may produce children who are not intrinsically motivated to explore their ethnic identity and, therefore, are not as strongly identified with their natal culture.

Hypotheses

To test these ideas, we investigated the following hypotheses:

> *Hypothesis 1:* Higher levels of perceived parental autonomy support will be positively related to greater natal acculturation among second-generation immigrants.
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> *Hypothesis 2:* Higher levels of perceived parental autonomy support will be positively related to greater levels of positive well-being among second-generation immigrants.
>
> *Hypothesis 3:* Higher levels of natal acculturation will be positively related to greater levels of positive well-being among second-generation immigrants.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from introductory psychology classes at a large Midwestern university, during two successive semesters. Students in these classes completed a pretest measure that contained several demographic items. They were identified as second-generation immigrants and invited to complete the online study if they indicated that they were born in the United States or came to live in the country before the age of 10 and if both of their parents had immigrated to the United States from a foreign country.

Although participants were recruited across two different semesters, the study methodology remained essentially the same, thus enabling us to aggregate our data when conducting our analyses. No differences were found between subsamples.

One hundred twelve individuals completed the survey. Thirteen of these participants reported being raised by someone other than their first-generation immigrant mother or father, so they were dropped from the analyses to ensure that participants were exposed to similar developmental influences. This procedure yielded 99 second-generation immigrants who were raised in two-parent immigrant households. Of these, 53% were men and 47% were women. Eleven percent of our participants' parents immigrated from African countries, 41% immigrated from Asian countries, 8% immigrated from Spanish-speaking countries, 32% immigrated from Europe or Canada, and 8% did not report their family's country of origin.[1] Sixty-nine percent of the participants were born in the United States, and 31% migrated to the United States before 10 years of age. Participant gender, ethnic background, and immigration status (U.S. born or immigrant) had no significant effects and are not considered further.

Procedure

Eligible participants were contacted and e-mailed a link to the online survey. After consenting to take part, participants answered a variety of questions described in the following section. At the completion of the survey, participants were debriefed and given class credit. The total duration of the study was a half hour.

Measures

Demographics. Participants were asked to indicate their gender, family income, and grade point average.

Natal and American culture exposure. We created four statements assessing participants' exposure to and education in both the natal and the host culture (i.e., "my parents exposed me to/educated me about my native culture/U.S. culture"). The scale for these four items ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), and natal culture exposure and American culture exposure scores were computed by averaging the relevant two items. The alpha reliability was .86 for natal culture exposure and .80 for U.S. culture exposure.

Well-being. General well-being was measured by the 4-item Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) and the 5-item Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Response choices for both scales ranged from 1 to 5, with higher numbers representing greater well-being. The alpha reliability for the Subjective Happiness Scale was .78, and the reliability for the Satisfaction With Life Scale was .83.

Internalization of native cultural activities. the perceived locus of causality assessment approach (Ryan & Connell, 1989) was adapted to assess the degree to which participants are internally motivated to participate in their natal cultural activities. Participants read, "*When* you are doing things to express your family's cultural heritage (i.e., participating in ceremonies and traditions, engaging in religious rituals, dressing in traditional clothing, etc.), *why* are you doing them?"; they then rated their reasons in terms of external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic motivation using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all for this reason*) to 5 (*very much for this reason*). As in much prior research (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), ratings for external and introjected motivation were reverse coded and averaged with ratings of introjected and intrinsic motivation to obtain an aggregate natal culture internalization score, with higher scores indicative of more autonomy and internalization. In our sample, the alpha reliability of this scale was .67.

Natal and American acculturation. Acculturation was measured with the Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS; Stephenson, 2000). This 32-item, 4-point Likert scale contained 17 items asking participants to indicate their knowledge, familiarity, and preference for their natal culture (e.g., "I eat traditional foods from my native culture") and 15 items pertaining to their association with the host culture (e.g., "I regularly read an American newspaper"). Mean scores were calculated for each subscale. In this sample, the alpha reliability for the Ethnic Society Immersion (ESI) subscale was .90, and the alpha reliability for the Dominant Society Immersion (DSI) subscale was .75.

Autonomy-supportive parenting. Measures of parental autonomy support have typically assessed maternal and paternal autonomy support in order to detect both similar and dissimilar maternal and paternal effects (Robbins, 1994). Building on this tradition, we used the Autonomy-Support subscale from Robbins's (1994) Perception of Parents Scale (POPS) to measure autonomy-supportive parenting. This 9-item scale was presented twice with respect to both mother and father; the scale is composed of items such as "My [parent referent], whenever possible, allows me to choose what to do" and "My [parent referent] allows me to decide things for myself." Responses on the 7-point response scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) were averaged to create maternal and paternal autonomy

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[1] Participants reported from which country their parents immigrated to the United States. However several countries listed did not have enough representatives to allow for meaningful country-level analyses. Therefore, we assigned broader region of origin categories— African (i.e., Eritrea, Malawi), Asian (i.e., India, Taiwan), Spanish speaking (i.e., Mexico, Venezuela), and European/Canadian (i.e., Ireland, Slovenia, Canada)—to probe for ethnic group differences. However, no significant differences emerged from this categorization or from analyses in which participants were further categorized as White and non-White.

Table 1
Study Means and Standard Deviations

Variable	*M*	*SD*
Exposure to natal culture	4.16	0.96
Exposure to U.S. culture	3.43	1.17
Happiness	3.80	0.70
Life satisfaction	3.67	0.74
Dominant society immersion	3.52	0.32
Ethnic society immersion	2.78	0.68
Natal culture internalization	3.63	0.86
Maternal autonomy support	5.13	1.19
Paternal autonomy support	5.00	1.29

Note. $N = 99$.

support variables. In these data, the alpha reliability for maternal autonomy support was .89, and the alpha for paternal autonomy support was .88. Studies that have previously used this scale cross-culturally have reported alphas ranging from .70 to .90, indicating that it is a reliable measure of parental autonomy support across diverse samples (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Engle, 2004; Sheldon, Abad, & Omoile, 2007).

Results

Preliminary Results

Table 1 provides means and standard deviations for the major study variables. Participants reported more developmental exposure to their natal culture than to U.S. culture, $t(98) = 5.53$, $p < .001$. However, on the SMAS, our participants reported being more acculturated into American culture (DSI) than they were into their natal culture (ESI), $t(98) = 9.40$, $p < .001$. This supports our supposition that despite parental emphasis on native culture exposure, our second-generation participants felt more assimilated into U.S. culture.

Within-subject *t* tests revealed that there was no mean difference between perceived paternal and maternal autonomy support, $t(99) = 0.91$, $p > .40$. It is also worth noting that maternal and paternal autonomy support were significantly positively correlated ($r = .27$, $p < .05$), signifying that participants' parents somewhat converged in their supportive versus controlling parenting styles. As expected, life satisfaction and happiness were strongly positively correlated ($r = .65$, $p < .01$), showing that these measures assessed similar constructs.

Table 3
Intercorrelations Between Acculturation and Well-Being

Variable	Happiness	Life satisfaction
Dominant society immersion	.11	.17
Ethnic society immersion	.10	.22*
Natal culture internalization	–.07	–.03

Note. $N = 99$.
$^{*}p < .01$.

Tests of Hypotheses

Intercorrelations. Table 2 shows the intercorrelations between parental autonomy support and both acculturation and well-being. Supporting our first two hypotheses, paternal autonomy support was significantly positively correlated with ethnic society immersion ($r = .35$, $p < .01$), internalization of natal cultural activities ($r = .31$, $p < .01$), happiness ($r = .40$, $p < .01$), and life satisfaction ($r = .33$, $p < .01$). However, maternal autonomy support was not significantly correlated with any of these variables.

In Hypothesis 3, we predicted that natal acculturation would be related to higher levels of well-being. Table 3 shows these correlations. Partly confirming our hypothesis, ethnic society immersion was significantly related to life satisfaction ($r = .22$, $p < .01$) but not to happiness. U.S. (dominant society) immersion was not associated with any index of well-being.

Multiple regressions. The previously discussed correlational analyses yielded some unexpected findings. In particular, maternal autonomy support was unrelated to acculturation and well-being. To further explore this finding, we conducted focused multiple regressions to determine whether maternal autonomy support is more influential when combined with low or high paternal autonomy support. Specifically, we created a multiplicative product term from centered maternal and paternal autonomy support scores and entered it into a series of regressions predicting acculturation and well-being outcomes. This interaction term was not significant in any of the analyses. Notably, in these analyses paternal autonomy support significantly predicted ethnic society immersion, $\beta = .37$, $t(99) = 3.74$, $p < .01$; natal culture internalization, $\beta = .30$, $t(99) = 2.97$, $p < .05$; happiness, $\beta = .41$, $t(99) = 4.18$, $p < .05$; and life satisfaction, $\beta = .30$, $t(99) = 3.03$, $p < .05$, even after controlling for the influence of maternal autonomy support (which remained nonsignificant). These analyses provide

Table 2
Intercorrelations of Parental Autonomy Support With Acculturation and Well-Being

Variable	DSI	ESI	Natal culture internalization	Happiness	Life satisfaction
Maternal autonomy support	−.07	.01	.11	.10	.18
Paternal autonomy support	.17	.35*	.31*	.40*	.33*

Note. $N = 99$. DSI = dominant society immersion; ESI = ethnic society immersion.
$^{*}p < .01$.

further evidence for the distinctive effects of paternal autonomy support on outcomes associated with second-generation immigrants.

We also tested for possible interactions between both natal and host acculturation with well-being through a series of focused multiple regressions. The interaction term did not significantly predict life satisfaction or happiness. Both natal and host acculturation independently predicted life satisfaction—natal: $\beta = .20$, $t(99) = 2.51$, $p < .05$; host: $\beta = .20$, $t(99) = 2.04$, $p < .05$—but neither predicted happiness.

Discussion

Children of immigrants face a complicated adolescence during which they are expected to be fluent in both their natal and host cultures. The pressure associated with being bicultural may be exacerbated by demands made by their first-generation immigrant parents. Given the tendency of children to rebel against controlling parents (Grolnick, 2003), we sought to investigate whether second-generation immigrants' perceptions of their parents would influence their natal acculturation.

The results from our studies demonstrated that paternal (but not maternal) autonomy support is indeed associated with higher natal culture endorsement and elevated levels of well-being among second-generation immigrants. This finding was unexpected, as self-determination theory posits only that individuals benefit from autonomy support in general and does not theorize which sources of autonomy support are more beneficial than others. Although we cannot fully explain these discriminative patterns using our data, the broader research on family dynamics offers findings that may be useful in understanding these results.

Existing studies on family functioning have found that fathers are typically instrumental caregivers, responsible for informing their child of their role in society, encouraging them to achieve success, and disciplining them when they do not meet acceptable standards (Amato, 1998, cited in Booth & Crouter, 1998; Furstenberg, 1998, cited in Booth & Crouter, 1998; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). In contrast, mothers are emotional caregivers, responsible for addressing the daily needs of their children and providing consistent emotional support for all members of the family (Liu et al., 2005; Rudy & Grusec, 2006; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Researchers have also found that paternal, but not maternal, distress was most predictive of lower family cohesion and poor child functioning when a family was undergoing periods of stress (Alderfer, Cnaan, Annunziato, & Kazak, 2005). These findings suggest that fathers may play an important role in their child's ability to create an identity in response to interactions with other family members and the outside world.

The data from our study suggests that fathers may continue to influence their children during periods of change in young adulthood. Our participants were mostly college freshman, transitioning between adolescence and adulthood in a novel place that may be unsupportive of their natal culture (Farver, Bakhtawar, & Narang, 2002; Lay & Safdar, 2003). It appears that the presence of a supportive father may influence these individuals' capacity to build resources necessary to stay grounded in such a situation. In contrast, controlling fathers and those lacking understanding may have measurable negative influences on these freshman students' ability to explore their identity as they adjust to collegiate life.

Limitations of this study include the fact that our constructs were measured only by self-report. Replicating the patterns with observer-report or parent-report methodologies would strengthen the picture. Furthermore, our results were only correlational and cross-sectional; thus, causal relations cannot be assumed. Future studies in this area should utilize a longitudinal design with more measures and respondents, as they may illuminate additional mechanisms by which second-generation immigrants position themselves within their natal and host cultures. Special attention should be paid to including global assessments of well-being, as the lack of clarity of the association between acculturation and well-being in our results could have been due to our assessment of only positive, and not negative, well-being. Finally, because participants' responses were aggregated across such different ethnic backgrounds, it is unclear whether our results will generalize to members of particular ethnic groups. In addition, because we only utilized a self-selecting college student sample, these results may not apply to other age groups or to young adults not attending college. Future studies should strive to increase the diversity of their sample by including participants from as many ethnicities and age groups as possible.

Overall, our study corroborates previous research showing that familial socialization processes are important mechanisms by which second-generation immigrants establish and maintain their relationship with their natal culture. In particular, positive paternal relationships appear to be associated with second-generation immigrants' ability to incorporate their natal culture into their identity and experience positive well-being. It may be that paternal autonomy support is representative of a broader family interaction style that encourages the child to explore novel environments, including new cultures. Our data suggest that second-generation immigrants use these freedoms during transition periods to merge seemingly disparate parts of their identity into a coherent whole.

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